



New Book Chronicle

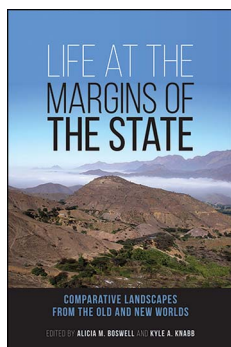
Marion Uckelmann

Life at the Margins

This New Book Chronicle looks at ‘Life in the margins’, a subject often less studied than the more obvious cultural hot spots but one which has been gaining interest in recent studies, especially due to its application to modern challenges in marginal or border regions; for example, see the ‘Borderlands debate’ in *Antiquity* last August (Hanscam & Buchanan 2023). The four books reviewed here all deliver the perspectives of people living in the margins of some sort. The first two explore the political margins of larger entities and how groups developed different strategies to successfully remain partially independent, with examples from across the Old and New World and the Near East. The third book helps to identify the new Bronze Age ‘Spačva-Luban’ group in eastern Croatia through exploring unusual burials at the margins of larger cultural groups.

The last book takes us to the most remote place discussed here: the monastery site of Skellig Michael off the coast of Ireland, where early Christian monks chose to live an ascetic life battling the elements. In all cases the margins studied are revealed to be more zones for contact and crucibles of change and, in the contrasting case of Skellig Michael, places where pilgrims and subsequently tourists—including Luke Skywalker—seek to recapture some of the spirituality and isolation. These types of experiences have become more and more difficult to find in our modern anytime-everywhere-connected world where many people long for some reflective time on their own. Reading these books makes one wonder if we now more than ever need these remote places away from overpowering systems, a space to think and in order to develop new ideas.

ALICIA M. BOSWELL & KYLE A. KNABB (ed.). 2022. *Life at the margins of the state: comparative landscapes from the Old and New Worlds*. Louisville: University Press of Colorado; 978-1-64642-294-4 hardback \$67.



This book is an excellent starting point for researching people living in marginal (political) landscapes as it offers many ideas and perspectives. The contributions deliver a wide scope from Nubia in the fourth and third millennia BC to medieval Iceland and reaching as far as the Americas. As diverse as the time periods and landscapes of the chapters are, they all look at societies at the margins of larger states. They examine and detail the political, social and economic differences to define the character of these often less-studied areas or moments in time. A passionate and well-written Introduction by the editors guides the reader into the subject where the margins are loosely defined as places in between or on the edge of complex and large entities. But instead of the traditional centre-periphery narratives where these

ancient communities in the margins are often described as more simple and passive, they are revealed here as agents that develop and defend resiliently their different lifeways. They work to sustain their autonomy from the looming neighbour so that these spaces become “crucibles of historical change” (p.3). Nine chapters deliver varied case studies of such landscapes and the book concludes with a short ‘Epilogue: Borderlandscapes’.

The first chapter by Kyle Knabb, one of the editors, presents research on the Iron Age of Wadi al-Feidh, in modern-day Jordan as a case study. In ancient times this part of the southern Levant was situated between the early states of Mesopotamia and Egypt which influenced and at times invaded it from both sides. Knabb finds that the unique geography and differing habitats led the people of this area to live in a more isolated and mobile way than the people in the agrarian states around them. Through this mobility they were able to establish and keep a certain degree of autonomy, and therefore ‘avoid state-ness’.

In the next chapter the second editor Alicia Boswell discusses the frontier area of the Sinsicap Valley in Peru, where during the Chimu Empire (AD 900–1400) encounters, exchange and coexistence between this powerful coastal polity and local groups can be studied. By adapting some of the traditions and beliefs of the stronger Chimu group, local people were also able to resist and preserve some of their own ways and maintain their own identity.

Tara Carter focuses on remote Medieval Iceland. Studies mapping economic networks across the North Atlantic, as well as small-scale island economy, describe how this marginality and self-sustainability linked with distant connections helped to lay the foundation of a state.

John Walker takes the reader to a place beyond the margins and the subject of research is the pre-Columbian earthworks in eastern Bolivia, Llanos de Mojos. The people who built these raised fields in order to use seasonal flooding and grow crops without much supervision, so called ‘escape crops’, are known today as the Mojeños. No evidence for a higher or state-like organisation or neighbouring states can be found; therefore, this Indigenous culture developed and blossomed independently.

Moving on to an ‘empty’ corner of colonial east El Salvador, Esteban Gómez highlights the oppression and exploitation of Indigenous groups but also themes of passive resistance. Some of these groups were able to find such resistance at the territorial margins, in using the colonial legal system to their own advantage, as well as keeping their Indigenous traditions alive.

Erin Smith and Mikael Fauvelle research the differences and similarities of two Indigenous groups in their social organisation with an emphasis on trade and warfare. The Chumash people, traditionally perceived as the more complex, and the Yuman-speaking people, of what is now California, both at the margins of the Mesoamerican states and Pueblo groups in the Southwest. The authors conclude that although these groups are differently organised they operate on comparable levels of complexity: the Yuman-speaking people with less hierarchy but a greater orientation towards conflict and mobility and the more settled Chumash with leading elites, as thriving producers.

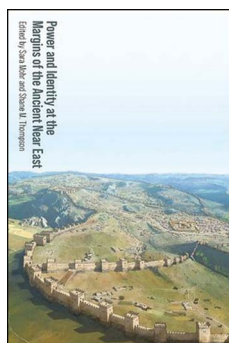
Kaq’ru Ha lies in the foothills of the Maya Mountains in southern Belize and, in the Classical Maya period, was at the margins of the Maya world. Claire Novotny looks at the level of adaption and the selection of new traditions that the people in this borderland chose to take on from the Maya heartland, in order to connect to the distant centres of the latter.

Meanwhile, focusing on Africa, Scott MacEachern researches the Wandala people of the Sahel zone (AD 1500–1900) and challenges the view that this group were just slave traders. The results show the Wandala as part of a more nuanced world of Islamic and non-Islamic groups that existed together and influenced each other in the marginal landscape.

The final chapter takes the reader to the fifth/fourth millennium BC Egypt and Nubia. Elena Garcea looks at the relationship between these two regions of the Nile Valley, as each developed distinct subsistence systems. These systems resulted in different ways of living and societies but were, especially in these early times, very much intertwined and they fuelled each other's developing complexity. This interpretation makes Nubia an active partner and not, as traditionally seen, a mere bystander.

These wide-ranging case studies are not easily comparable, but all highlight the importance of the geography of these borderlands and show that unique lifeways and identities can emerge from these perceived marginal places, sometimes with a long-term historical impact. The authors all succeed in shifting our focus and delivering a new perspective from within these 'borderlandscapes'.

SARA MOHR & SHANE M. THOMPSON (ed.). 2023. *Power and identity at the margins of the Near East*. Denver: University Press of Colorado; 978-1-64642-357-6 hardback \$63.



The second volume in this NBC is similar in topic to the previous one but investigates a much closer temporal and spatial span: the Bronze and Iron Ages of the Near East. The book is the outcome of a conference held in October 2019 at Brown University, Rhode Island, USA, and written and edited during the difficult times of the Covid pandemic.

Sara Mohr and Shane Thompson as editors open the discussion in their introduction 'Notes in the margins' and advocate to change the view from traditional centre-periphery studies to more open-minded perspectives and looking from the margins themselves outward. The varied case studies also reveal a strong independence and sense of identity

of the people in the margins and turn them into actors and not simply those acted upon. These places in the shadow of the Egyptian and Hittite empires became often crucial areas of sociopolitical change. The editors also stress the importance of combining archaeological and textual sources to gain a deeper understanding. Although the contributions include archaeological evidence, at least in part, the interpretative influence of ancient texts remains overwhelmingly dominant in this volume. Eric Trnka closes the book with 'Reflections from the margins' and incorporates the themes of the contributions with further thoughts on how the study of margins can be brought fruitfully forward by the change of traditional frameworks such as the core-periphery theories. Eight chapters deliver detailed studies on places and people in the margins.

The scene of the first case study by Avraham Faust is Late Bronze/Iron Age Canaan (1300–1100 BC). The shift from indirect to stricter direct control by Egypt over Canaan lowlands in the thirteenth century BC led to a settlement surge in the highlands and ultimately to